

ART OF HAVERHILL *by Patricia J. Bruno*

Quilting: centuries-old craft or modern art form?

Where is the line crossed from craft into art? Perhaps it's archaic to distinguish between the two. Does the maker's intention define the difference? Generally, if an object is created with a specific use or function in mind, it is considered a craft, while art is often described as an expressive work with no practical purpose. Yet art can be functional, and crafts can be artistic. If a piece speaks to the viewer in some way—through its form, colors or textures—it is probably fair to consider it art.

To most people, quilting conjures up images of pioneer women tediously piecing together worn scraps of material into bedcovers to ward off the cold. Actually, quilt making may date to as far back as Ancient Egypt, spanning many cultures. Making a quilt was for centuries a strictly utilitarian concept, and the idea of piecing together an elaborately designed heirloom quilt did not come about until the mid-18th century in America. That's when fabric was manufactured in our country, making it more readily available. Today's quilts, while still serving a practical purpose, can be stunning and evocative works of art.

A visit to the studio of artist and veteran quilter Elizabeth Swan, of Haverhill's Swan Quilting (swanquilting.com), will dispel any notions of quilting as a simple craft. With a degree in computer programming and computer-information systems, Swan is creating works of art using sophisticated technology as well as traditional methods.

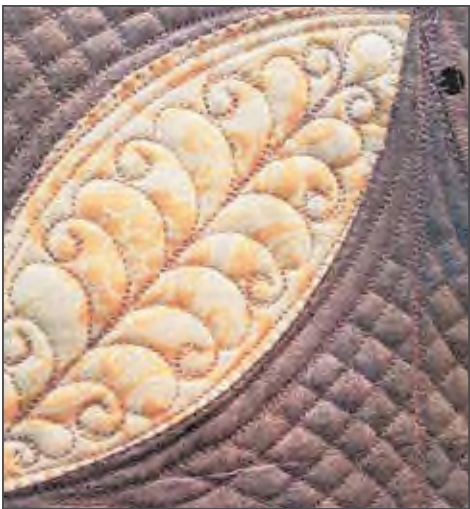
In Swan's studio—surrounded by neat stacks of colorful fabric, rows of thread spools, and displays of stunning completed quilts—sits a 12-foot "longarm" sewing machine built on an enormous frame. Complete with a computer, this industrial-grade machine brings the ancient art



into the 21st century, allowing Swan to design and sew large quilts efficiently. Yet beyond the high-tech presence of the computer screen, the graphic and artfully designed patterns of Swan's quilts shine as true works of art. Although designed to be fully functional as machine-washable bed coverings, these quilts stand up as design elements when hung on a wall.

Swan began making quilts in 1991. As a young newlywed, she came across a book titled *Make a Quilt in a Day*. Intrigued, she gathered up the required materials and completed her first quilt—a year later. While she didn't receive the instant gratification that the book promised, she nevertheless found herself hooked on the entire process. Today, Swan teaches classes, does the finish work for others, and, of course, still creates her own quilts.

The process begins with choosing a design and fabric, which is cut into pieces and then sewn back together into a pattern. This step is called "piecing," and the result becomes the quilt top. The final step is to create a "sandwich" by layering and sewing together the top, a filling such as cotton batting, and a piece of backing fabric. Called quilting, it is the most difficult and intricate part of the process. This is where Swan's expertise comes in, as



she takes a customer's unfinished pieces and brings them to completion by stitching them together on the enormous machine. "My favorite part of quilt making is that moment when I release the finished quilt from the 12-foot frame where it has been stretched and, in a way, treated as if it were on a torture rack," says Swan. "As it is released, the fibers relax, and it springs to life."

For several years Swan offered her quilts at the Haverhill Farmers Market, and she is grateful for the connections that she made during that time. These days she is president of the Merrimack Valley Quilters Guild (mvquilters.org), which offers workshops and also holds an annual quilt show at which members' quilts are judged in a competition. As a member, Swan is required each year to enter one of her own quilts, which is judged on a point system for quality of workmanship. Entries are anonymous, and she must stand by, heart pounding, as the judges comment on every detail of a piece over which she has labored for months. Yet Swan says she can't take things too seriously, despite the intensity of the judg-

ing process. After all, quilt makers are human, so they aren't perfect.

Among the most satisfying projects for Swan are the memory quilts that customers commission. Consisting of pieces of clothing belonging to a loved one, these items are very often made to commemorate someone who has passed away. "When the final quilt is picked up, I always anticipate an emotional moment with hugs and tears, as in the case of a mother whose son had committed suicide at an early age," says Swan. "She said that she would find comfort wrapping herself in something that was close to him."

When asked about the blurred line between art and craft, Swan says she is not an artist or a crafter, but an artistic craft person. When looking at the work of other quilt makers, she favors those quilts that were created for both aesthetic and practical purposes. "The so-called 'art quilts,' those intended as wall hangings only, are not the ones to which I am drawn," say Swan. "I react to quilts that will be used lovingly, to wrap oneself in or to wrap up a child. These are the ones that speak to my heart."



Patricia J. Bruno is a photographer, writer and downtown-business owner. A New England native, she shares her home in Haverhill with her loving husband and lovable cat.



Patricia J. Bruno photos



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